

Ideas, interests and institutions; explaining Irish social security policy

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Abstract: Ideas, interests and institutions; Explaining Irish social security policy

We might expect that in such a small open economy as Ireland, the impact of global pressures on social policy would be relatively strong (McCoy, 2008). This paper tests such a thesis through a case study of Irish social security policy and argues that, over the period 1986–2006, Irish social security policy responded to global and domestic pressures in a particularly Irish fashion, qualitatively different to other liberal welfare regimes and to other small open European economies.

In seeking to understand this puzzle the paper explores and analyses the social security policy institutions where social security policy is mediated. It outlines the Irish policy architecture – the political, institutional and ideational factors that shape the trajectory of Irish social security development. The paper identifies domestic constraints on globalisation and factors that influence the social construction of policy. It concludes by recommending changes in the policy process that might help lead to more equitable policy outcomes.

Key words

Irish social security, political mediation, policy community

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Abbreviations

ALMP	Active Labour Market Programmes
CMRS	Conference of Major Religious Superiors
CORI	Conference of Religious in Ireland
CPSU	Civil and Public Service Union
CVP	Community and Voluntary Pillar
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
DSFA	Department of Social and Family Affairs
DSW	Department of Social Welfare
DSCFA	Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs
DOF	Department of Finance
DOT	Department of the Taoiseach
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
IFA	Irish Farmers Association
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISPA	Irish Social Policy Association
IPA	Institute of Public Administration
NAP/incl	National Action Plan Against Poverty and Social Exclusion
NAPS	National Anti-Poverty Strategy
NEAP	National Employment Action Plan
NESDO	National Economic and Social Development Office
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NESF	National Economic and Social Forum
NWCI	National Women's Council of Ireland
NPB	National Pensions Board
OECD	Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development
OMC	Open Method of Co-ordination

OSI	Office for Social Inclusion
PIA	Poverty Impact Assessment
PSEU	Public Services Executive Union
SIPTU	Services, Industrial and Professional Trade Union

Glossary

‘At risk of poverty’: a term used by the European Union to denote whether a household or individual earns below the 60 per cent of median income threshold

Claimant: a person applying for a payment in his/her own right either for themselves or for themselves and child or adult dependants

Consistent poverty: originally a measure of poverty of those who were ‘at risk of poverty’ and deprived of at least one out of the 8 items considered necessary to ensure a basic standard of living. Now a measure of poverty of those who are ‘at risk of poverty’ and deprived of at least two out of 11 items

Contingency: a specific ‘state’ which a person must be able to prove in order to be eligible for payment, e.g. disability, illness, old age, unemployment

Contribution record: record of amount of PRSI paid or credited to people during their working lives.

Economic vulnerability: a measure of the economic situation of a household based on whether it is ‘at risk of poverty’, experiences enforced basic deprivation and has difficulty making ends meet

Employment rate: the proportion of the working-age population that is working

Equivalence scales: a set of scales used to measure household income and adjust it to take into account the greater needs of larger households

EU-SILC: European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions; in Ireland an annual survey carried out by the Central Statistics Office since 2003

Irish social welfare system: Irish system of income support administered by the Department of Social and Family Affairs (previously Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs; and before that, Department of Social Welfare)

Labour force participation: a measure of the proportion of the working-age population that engages actively in the labour market, either by working or looking for work

LIIS: Living in Ireland Survey, a household survey carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute between 1994 and 2001

Lone parent: a parent who has primary custody of a dependent child and is not living with the other parent

Long-term unemployed: those who are measured as unemployed for a year or more

Means test: four specific tests for different categories of income – income from earnings (and income from spouse’s earnings); benefit and privilege (i.e. the value of living in the family home); savings and investments; rental income from property

Median: the value that divides a sample in half, e.g. income level divided exactly in the middle of a scale of income from highest to lowest

NAP/inclusion: two-year action plans that member states of the EU are required to draw up. Entitled Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAP/inclusion). The plans are part of an ongoing EU commitment to make a decisive impact on poverty and social exclusion by 2010 in each member state. Ireland’s current NAP/inclusion runs from 2006–2008

Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC): provides an innovative instrument to support the member states in moving towards agreed EU objectives and to exchange best practice in the areas of employment, social protection and social inclusion. The OMC is a framework of political coordination without legal constraints. The definition of the appropriate means and ways to achieve the agreed objectives is left to the member states, respecting thus their competences in these fields

Pay-related social insurance (PRSI) payments: insurance (usually a per cent of earnings) paid by employed people into a fund that then covers them should they be unable to work

Quintile: one-fifth of a sample divided into five equal parts to show how income, for example, is spread throughout the population; each quintile represents where a person's or household's income is located

Social assistance payments: payments that are means tested and funded totally by the Exchequer. To qualify, a person must prove a contingency and pass a means test

Social welfare transfers: cash paid from various social welfare schemes to individuals or households

Statement of Strategy: produced by each Department in accordance with the Public Service Management Act 1997. Includes key objectives, the strategies to achieve them and indicators of output and outcome against which performance will be assessed

Supplementary welfare allowance: a means-tested safety net system for those who fall out of social insurance or assistance because they cannot prove any of the contingencies or because they have a specific need that cannot be met in the mainstream social welfare system

Universal payments: a class of payments paid to everyone who passes a specific contingency; paid regardless of means and social insurance record

'Working poor': A household below the 'at risk of poverty' threshold (e.g. 60 per cent of median equivalised income) even though some of its members are in paid work

1 Introduction

Across the world social security systems are under pressure. Economic and political pressures associated with increased globalisation lead to new social vulnerabilities. Domestic trends such as ageing populations and changing household structures also create new social risks. The Globalisation Index (Kearney, 2003, 2004, 2005) ranked Ireland as one of the world's most globalised countries. The impact of global pressures is stronger on small open economies like Ireland. Therefore we might expect globalisation to have a significant impact on Irish social policy.

To test the impact globalisation may have had, this paper examines Irish social security change over the past two decades. It argues that, over the period 1986–2006, Irish social security policy responded to global and domestic pressures in a particularly Irish fashion, qualitatively different to other liberal welfare regimes and to other small open European economies. In seeking to understand this puzzle the paper explores and analyses the political culture and social security policy institutions where social security policy is mediated. The paper identifies domestic constraints on globalisation and factors that influence the social construction of policy. It concludes by recommending changes in the policy process that might help lead to more equitable policy outcomes.

In trying to understand the different paths that policy development can take the concept of path-dependency has some explanatory potential. Simply explained path dependence means that institutions are self-reinforcing, that policy, once developed in a particular direction, is locked into that policy choice and is difficult to change (Pierson, 1998). This means we can expect the original construction of Irish social security design as a liberal and male breadwinner welfare regime to determine some of the direction of future Irish social security reform. However, path dependency does not explain the

momentum or the distinctive style, pace and discourse of Irish reform or why Irish reform has diverged from those countries with which it had path dependency. Daly and Yeates (2003) reflect on the same question and offer 'policy architecture' as a possible explanation. Hay (2004a) offers a three-dimensional framework to understand the process of change as an interaction of ideas, institutions and actors.

This paper explores the Irish policy architecture – the political, institutional and ideational factors that shape the trajectory of Irish social security development. Section Two briefly explores the competition-focused Irish model of development and summarises key social security trends of the past two decades. Section Three introduces the Irish political culture. This sets the scene for Section Four which analyses the policy institutions and processes in which some of key social security decisions were mediated and the power interests who mediated the policy. Section Five examines whether politics matters for Irish social security reform while Section Six discusses the political discourse and ideational debate that framed Irish social security policy. Section Seven brings together such institutions, actors and ideational influences and highlights how features of the Irish policy environment work to constrain policy. It mitigates threats of globalisation but constrains the possibility of equitable reforms. The paper concludes with recommendations for enhancing the policy community.

2 Trends in Irish social security policy

Cerny et al (2005) characterise a competition state model as a state in which the actors – both politicians and bureaucrats – react to the pressures of the global market by promoting the competitive advantages of particular production and service sectors in a more open and integrated world economy. Kirby (2002) argues that it describes the nature and operation of an Irish state that prioritises goals of economic competitiveness over social cohesion and welfare. Dukelow (2004) and Murphy (2006) have stressed the Irish state's selective interventionist role, enhancing economic competitiveness while failing to intervene and tackle high levels of income inequality and poverty. Boyle (2005) describes Ireland as an exemplar competition state where social policy is subordinated to the needs of the economy.

This paper is concerned with what happens to social security policy in a competition state. How do the needs and power of capital drive social security policy?

Figure 2.1 below summarises some of the anticipated social security policy changes of a competition state. The end outcome we might expect is for people to be more reliant on the market to realise their welfare and for welfare to be delivered using private market principles – for welfare to recommodify. The following discussion uses the framework in Figure 2.1 to trace the development of Irish social security reform over the past two decades.

Figure 2.1: Anticipated competition state policy changes

Key trends	
Recommodification	Anticipated competition state policy changes
Regulation	State as regulator, more focus on privatisation and managerialism
Retrenchment	Fiscal pressure – Cost cutting; Cost containment; Cost avoidance
Residualisation	More means-tested targeted payments; increased relative poverty; non labour-market participants are poorer
Activation/ Conditionality	Active spending, Conditionality, Activation of lone-parents and/or disability claimants
Defamiliarisation	Individualisation; Women's access to education and training; Market provision of childcare

2.1 A regulatory state?

A regulatory or competition state 'should provide a working framework of rules and performance indicators or targets for market actors to follow' (Cerny et al, 2005:17). Historically, while Ireland has been a mixed economy welfare state, social security has been almost exclusively a statutory responsibility. Over the past two decades the state has made some attempts to divest itself of social security responsibility by affording greater opportunity to private market companies to deliver welfare policy including private pensions, health and disability insurance packages. Tax incentives mean citizens think differently about how to provide for key social policy needs.

However, the state is also ambiguous about extending the role of the private market. It resists, for example, the EU procurement process that opens up the possibility of tendering out, to private and public bodies, the delivery of services previously monopolised by statutory bodies (e.g. contracts for social security postal delivery).

The state also attempted to divest itself of its traditional social protection role when it proposed to transfer disability protection to employers in both 1988 and 1992. In contrast to the British experience (where there was a transfer of this function to private business), the Irish proposals were successfully vetoed by employers.

The government invitation to the private pension industry to chair the National Pensions Board and a more business-led style of governance resulted in the commodification or privatisation of pensions. This was strongly advocated by the international financial services sector and resisted by civil servants; the international context was the World Bank's promotion of a privatisation agenda in pension policy.

Since 1991 the state promoted the social inclusion role of the non-profit private sector with the local Area-Based Partnerships. Since 1994, employment support functions including the Local Employment Service have been delegated to local non-statutory agencies. A 1999 White Paper promoted regulation of the community and voluntary sector. NESC (2005) and NESF (2006) signalled a shift to service contracts requiring a new model of governance where the role of the state moves away from the provision of services to 'a regulator of rights and standards and enabler of local activist networks' (NESC, 2005: 206-7). However, the scale and scope of transformative change has not reflected such ambitious rhetoric.

Managerialism is evident in Irish social policy. Consumerism, choice and new public management discourse are evident in the Strategic Management Initiative and Public Services Management Act (1997), and initiatives like 'customer service plans', 'customer service targets', and 'service delivery models' abound. A process of 'expenditure reviews', emphasising value for money, has had some impact on policy development. However, there is considerable resistance to new public management practices and institutional change in the Irish public service. While there is strong evidence of the state engaging in a new public management ethos of customer-focused delivery it

remains to be seen whether such engagement has fundamentally transformed staff and claimant experience of social security delivery and whether the state has the power to transform public service delivery (OECD, 2008).

2.2 Retrenchment

In a competition state we expect a low-tax development model to necessitate budgetary constraint and cost containment measures. In the Irish context two factors are worth highlighting. One factor is path dependency. In a liberal residual welfare state with a high degree of reliance on means-tested payments, there is little room to reduce already ungenerous payments. The second factor is Ireland's exceptional economic performance. Ireland's high economic growth rates and limited pressures from an ageing population means that from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, Ireland not only suffered less fiscal pressure than did other OECD countries but, up to 2007, had budget surpluses and the capacity to expand social security rates and coverage.

The period has been described as a 'missed opportunity' but can be more aptly termed 'arrested development' where government abstained from using the fruits of economic growth to expand and improve social protection to the degree that might have been anticipated in a period of economic growth (Alber and Standing, 2000:99). Despite globalisation offering the fiscal capacity to be truly transformative the Irish government chose to leave the social security system largely intact and unchanged (Cousins, 2005).

Ireland experienced significant social insurance retrenchment in the 20 years, 1986 -2006 but less retrenchment of social assistance payments. Two sets of social security cuts, the 1992 'Dirty Dozen' and the 2003 'Savage Sixteen', while short-term responses to periods of particularly tight fiscal austerity,¹ effectively retrenched social insurance benefits. The period cannot however be characterised as one of significant retrenchment or budgetary

¹ 1992 EMU preparations and the post 9/11 recession in 2002–2003)

transformation and real spending grew over the entire period. Less obvious long-term cost-containment policies have had a more serious impact on Irish society.

The Department of Finance, with its concern for controlling expenditure, dominates the setting of social security rates. Proposals in 1998 for a pensions adequacy benchmark and in 2001 for an adequacy benchmark for the lowest social assistance payments were rejected by an advocacy coalition of the Department of Finance, employers' representatives and the Department of Enterprise and Employment. The coalition was motivated by a combination of future cost containment, maintenance of work incentives and ensuring a level of flexibility considered essential to adapt to the global economy.

More puzzling in the Irish case is the failure in the early 1990s to index earned income disregards. Freezing income disregards makes work incentive policy less effective and is inconsistent with a productivist-focused competition state. Such deviation is more likely explained by a cost-fixated Department of Finance dominating annual budget negotiations than by any developmental logic.²

There has been significant 'cost avoidance' or resistance to accommodate new social risks through the social security system. The failure to accommodate gender-related reform is discussed later. Cost avoidance can also be seen in policy responses to inflows of asylum seekers and migrant workers. State policy is to exclude these needs from Irish social security. In 1999 asylum seekers were restricted to 'direct provision' welfare entitlement. The May 2004 restriction of welfare entitlement to 'habitual residents' left migrants at the mercy of the market. As a result of direct lobbying from

² Some cuts, such as the 1994 child-income support reforms which froze the monetary value of means-tested child-dependant allowances, do reflect policy restructuring motivated by work incentives rather than fiscal pressures (NESC, 2005: 52). These however required no fiscal investment.

international companies, legislation was introduced to exempt certain non-EU migrant workers from social insurance coverage. Social security policy is therefore actively responding to the needs and desires of international capital rather than to international labour.

2.3 Residualisation?

Competition state theory anticipates new forms of inequality and increased gaps between rich and poor; it expects those most distant from the labour market to suffer most poverty. Because 'Ireland is exceptional within the EU for the high proportion of its social spending which is means tested' there has been less shifting from universal to selective social security payments than one might otherwise expect in a competition state. NESC (2005) recommends that Ireland maintain this hybrid model and reliance on means-tested payments. Despite employment growth and decreases in unemployment, levels of dependency on social welfare among the working aged remain stubbornly high. High dependency on means-tested payments might not matter if payments were adequate. However, Irish policy has always stressed work incentives and low replacement rates. These rates, which have been characterised by a minimal subsistence type of support, have in fact further declined relative to average net earnings.

Despite assertions to the contrary there is evidence of a widening of income inequality in Ireland over the course of the economic boom. Between 1994 and 2005, the poorest 10 per cent's share of national income decreased by 0.6 per cent and the richest 10 per cent increased by 1.2 per cent. While in 1994 15.6 per cent lived below the 60 per cent poverty line, by 2006 17 per cent lived below the same line. Using EU comparable data, 19 per cent of Irish people experience a risk of poverty compared to an EU average of 16 per cent (CORI, 2008:27).

Other measures of income inequality such as the S80/20 and the Gini coefficient remained stable over this period at 5 and .33 respectively. In Fahey et al (2007) Whelan and Layte argue that the Irish state 'has not prioritised equity as an objective' or made any 'concerted attempt to equalise

incomes through taxation and redistribution'. The political choice was to follow the central logic of a competition state and keep welfare relatively ungenerous in order to preserve work incentives.

There has been a shift in the composition of groups experiencing relative poverty, those outside the labour market experience this higher risk of poverty. Unemployment, while still significant, is no longer the major risk factor; those at greatest risk – people with disabilities – found their rate increased by 24 per cent from 1994 to 2003; they remain with a 40.8 per cent risk in 2006 the second highest at-risk group; unemployed people are most vulnerable. The aged and people in home duties/lone parents saw their rate of poverty increase by 23 per cent and 16 per cent respectively over the same period. While generous pension provision over budgets 2005–2007 brought older people's poverty risk down to 14.8 per cent in 2006, the poverty risk for those in home duties remained high at 23.8 per cent in 2006. The trend is clear. Those relying primarily on social welfare, particularly those in receipt of working aged social assistance means-tested payments, are most likely to fall below poverty lines linked to average incomes.

2.4 Activation/Conditionality?

The traditional principle of designing social security to preserve work incentives is now underpinned by a new Irish focus on 'performative inclusion', which stresses employment as the best route out of poverty³ (Dukelow, 2004). This section seeks to establish the particular style and scale of Irish commodification by reviewing three key trends: spending on active measures, changes in 'conditionality' and extension of activation beyond unemployed claimants. If Irish social policy rhetoric is translated into policy, it is here that we might expect to find significant transformation of social policy towards a more active policy that is consistent with the logic of a competition state.

³ In 2006 6.5 per cent of the working population (116,000 people) were at risk of poverty. This highlights the vulnerability of employment-focused anti-poverty strategies.

In the competition state we expect public investment to shift to active labour market spending. Significant active labour market expenditure is a long-standing feature of the Irish welfare state and Irish spending on active labour market programmes increased from an already comparatively high 1.46 per cent of GDP in 1985 to 1.53 per cent of GDP in 2000 (a significant real spending increase), while over time programmes have become more progression oriented and linked to participation obligations.⁴ There is still scant evidence of the level of transformational institutional reform of either employment services or income support offices experienced across most OECD countries (Finn, 2000).

Irish social security literature is ambiguous about whether Irish policy has moved towards more work obligations. McCashin (2004), Van Oorschot (2002), Boyle (2005), Ó Riain and O'Connell (2000), Daly and Yeates (2003), Martin and Grubb (2001) and Pearson (2003) all conclude that compulsion is remarkably absent in the Irish policy regime relative to more conditional practice in both liberal regimes and small open economies. Taylor (2002) and Dukelow (2004) conclude that policy shows significant supportive *and* punitive changes which, combined, have pushed or pulled welfare claimants towards employment. This stronger style of commodification, 'systematic engagement', was introduced in the 1997 National Employment Action Plan (NEAP), a window of opportunity occasioned by the European Employment Strategy Open Method of Co-ordination.

There remain institutional vetoes on a stronger model of conditionality which would transform work obligations to lone parents, spouses of male claimants, and people with disabilities. The Department of Social and Family Affairs (2000c) argues that reluctance to extend conditionality is due to the lack of a coherent childcare infrastructure and of services for people with disabilities. Procrastination may also be due to fear of a political backlash from those

⁴ Active labour market programmes, administered by a number of government departments, have been criticised for a lack of focus on progression to employment (Dukelow, 2004). Boyle (2005) explains this as an outcome of policy-makers, including backbench politicians, supporting the social-policy rather than the labour-market aspect of programmes.

who might conservatively respond to measures designed to deny women their 'right' to work in the home.

2.5 Defamiliarisation?

While not yet implemented, DSFA proposals in 2006 to extend work obligations to lone parents and dependent spouses could have potentially far-reaching implications in moving from a contingency-based social security system to a more productivist system where all working age social assistance recipients are required to have a 'lifetime attachment to the labour force'. If achieved this reform would reflect a significant shift in policy consensus. However, despite significant rhetoric, by late 2008 there is still little evidence of political ambition for such reform.

Likewise while the state partially individualised personal tax credits, despite some debate there has been little progress towards individualising working-aged social security payments, and Irish social security remains a male breadwinner regime in a family-based, gender-differentiated social security system where women experience considerable obstacles to registering as unemployed or accessing labour market supports. Failure to develop a childcare infrastructure remains the biggest obstacle to increased employment participation for women. The state relies on market-led responses to childcare and limits eldercare responses to tax incentives to provide private nursing homes.

Failure to individualise social security or to introduce child and elder care supports is paradoxical in a competition state aiming to increase the labour force participation of mothers. A neo-liberal fixation on limiting state intervention is a partial explanation but policy inaction or lack of transformation is not just about cost avoidance. Policy paralysis is due to politicians' fears of introducing reforms in the absence of policy consensus and to the political difficulty of mediating between those advocating conflicting policy options. Policy is also limited by the strong veto power of employers who resist parental leave policies. The lack of policy to promote

women's economic participation is also due to a deeply rooted ideological ambiguity about mothers' labour-market participation in a conservative, patriarchal political culture (O'Connor and Murphy, 2008; O'Connor, 2008). Despite these obstacles women's and especially mothers' labour market participation has increased significantly in Ireland.

Summarising the type of change observed under these five competition state indicators we see some evidence of movement from a redistributive welfare state to a productivist reordering of social policy to meet economic needs. However, given significant demand for Irish labour, there is less focus on welfare-to-work strategies than might have been expected. Specifically there has been little progress relating to women's access to employment, less upgrading of income disregards and tackling of unemployment traps, less conditionality and less extension of conditionality to groups outside the formal live register, than one might expect. Sweeney and O'Donnell (2003:33) and Cousins (2005: 339) argue that Irish social security policy has not yet adapted to the needs of competitiveness. NESF (2000: 65), Loftus (2005) and NESF (2006) highlight the lack of a comprehensive welfare work strategy. Irish experience of reform, while broadly consistent with the above competition state indicators, is also less consistent with some key productivist expectations of a competition state.

How can we explain why elements of Irish change contain features that are somewhat uncharacteristic of a competition state.? As suggested earlier, path dependence has some explanatory power. The high number of contingency payments inherited from the past makes restructuring quite complex, limits the scope and pace of social security reform options and enables those resisting reform to hide behind the complexity of the reform. Change is rendered less urgent because the Irish social security system is already 'lean and mean' and its employment orientation already broadly consistent with a liberal market economy. The benefits reaped from the global economy – high levels of job creation and related reductions in unemployment – rendered it less necessary to introduce harsher conditional

obligations on unemployed people and others. Path dependency alone cannot explain why Irish social security reform appears to have its own distinctive style, pace and discourse and in particular why it diverges from those countries with which it shared path dependency.

Daly and Yeates (2003) discuss the same question and offer policy architecture as a possible explanation. The rest of this paper explores this policy architecture – the political, institutional and ideational factors that may have shaped the trajectory of Irish social security development.

3 Irish political culture

Before examining specific aspects of the Irish social security policy community we first reflect on the wider political culture which influences the policy environment of every actor in the policy community. There is a lively literature contesting different understandings of the Irish state, its capacity, level of autonomy and model of development (Ó Riain and O'Connell, 2000; Allen, 2000; O'Hearn, 1998; Cousins, 1995 a, 2005; Kirby, 2002; Taylor, 2005). While the literature reflects serious disagreement about the nature of the Irish state it also reflects consensus about key characteristics of the peculiar post-colonial institutions of the Irish state.

Some of these characteristics are usefully described as 'veto points'. Hay (2004a:205) differentiated states according to institutional characteristics like the type of electoral regimes and the number of 'veto points'. As Swank (2002:285) observed:

Central features of domestic institutions shape ... promote or impede configurations of norms, values and behaviours embodied in national policy-making routines that favour or disfavour slow adaptation to the pressures of globalisation and the inclusion of all interests in that process.

For the status quo to change, a certain number of individual or collective decision-makers must agree to this change. A veto player can be understood as 'an individual or collective actor whose agreement is required for a policy decision' (Tsebelis, 2000:209). Relative to other Anglo-Saxon regimes, Ireland has a higher and an increasing number of veto players.⁵ Combined with the conservative nature of the early Irish state which valued continuity of policy-making and rejected policy innovation (Lee, 1989; Acheson et al, 2004; Ferriter, 2004; Kiam-Caudle, 1967), Irish veto players work to limit policy change. Lijphart mapped shifts in democratic styles in 26 states from 1980 to 2000 and illustrated how Ireland moved from a (barely) majoritarian

⁵ Lijphart (1999) hypothesised that countries with coalition governments, bicameral legislatures, flexible constitutions, presidential institutions, corporate interest group mediation, federal or decentralised governance and PR-based electoral systems will have more veto players and as a result will experience more difficulty in achieving policy change.

style democracy to a consensus-oriented democracy.⁶ Multiple vetoes lead to policy cultures dominated by blame avoidance or policy avoidance (Hood, 2002:16-20, Green-Petersen and Haverland, 2002:24; Pierson 1994, 1996) but also to a consensus culture and a more 'kind and gentle' policy predisposition (Lijphart, 1999:301). However, the problem is that such institutions mitigate both negative *and* positive reform and produce a frozen landscape of policy reform.

Ireland is the only English-speaking country or liberal welfare regime that fits the 'consensus' typology. We can expect therefore that the politics of mediating welfare reform in Ireland will be different to that in other liberal welfare regimes. Ditch and Oldfield (1999) differentiated between 'innovative' and 'consolidating' regimes. While they did not include Ireland in their analysis the above discussion on veto points suggests Ireland is more likely to be 'consolidating' than 'innovating'.

How do institutional features of the Irish state impact on the style of policy mediation? It is striking, the degree to which one Irish institution, the Proportional Representation electoral system, dominates and influences the political culture and policy system. Lijphart (1999) distinguished between multi-member-district parliamentary systems with Proportional Representation (PR) and single member first-past-the-post plurality or majority voting systems.⁷ Cousins (2005:124), Stephens, Huber and Ray (1999) and Swank (2002) concur with Hay's (2004a:205) comment that 'centralised adversarial first-past-the-post and two-party systems are more prone to crisis induced policy-making than others which are more prone to incremental reforms'.

The PR electoral system is also more favourable to smaller parties and independents and reinforces the likelihood of coalition governments and a

⁶ Ireland is characterised by Lijphart (1999: 67, 114–117, 189) as a unitary and centralised, two and half party, semi-presidential system with parliament and an elected president, a 'medium influencing' Prime Minister and 'weakish' in relation to judicial review and constitutional rigidity.

⁷ See Lijphart (1999:148) and Sinnott (2004) for a full explanation of PRSTV.

veto culture (Lijphart, 1999:150). Contending politicians, in order to attract as wide a range of transfers as possible, avoid controversy, 'crowd the middle and cloud ideological differences'.⁸ Social security policy, given that its impacts are individually experienced, immediate and transparent, is particularly sensitive to PR and the emphasis on consensus in Irish political culture. Multi-seat constituencies lead to intra-party competition. Politicians, unable to differentiate themselves by way of party or policy, instead emphasise brokerage relations with the electorate. Such a political culture is 'localistic, clientalistic and intensely responsive' (Boyle, 2005:22).

This type of electoral system is sensitive to key groups who can swing votes including transfers towards or away from certain parties or candidates and it provides advantages for large interest groups representing sectoral or local interests.⁹ Groups with sufficient organisational capacity to swing their membership or public opinion receive disproportionately more attention from the political system. This leads to dysfunction in the policy system where policy decisions that are in the national interest may be vetoed by sectoral interests (de Buitléar et al, 1998; Barry, 2005:49). Sinnott's 2007 study of the Irish voter affirms the impact of this institutional configuration on Irish policy discourse. In particular he argues that the emphasis on candidate-centred voting means an absence of ideological voting and a lack of linkage between elections and national policy.

A highly centralised Irish executive cabinet dominates the houses of the Oireachtas – the Dáil and Seanad (Connolly, 2004:249). Such highly centralised governance should make it relatively easy for a political party with a parliamentary majority to implement significant welfare change (Cousins, 2005:123). However, in the past two decades it has proven impossible for

⁸ In multi-seat constituencies governments are not decided until the last seat is determined. Last seats are often determined on transfers from the eighth or ninth count. In order to attract such late transfers parties need to attract transfers from voters who have given earlier votes to opposition parties. This orientates parties to play safe consensus politics that will not alienate potential transfers.

⁹ Gillespie (2005) describes the Irish PR system as having 'seismographic qualities which enable minor tremors in public opinion transfer into significant changes in parliamentary representation'.

one political party to achieve a parliamentary majority. Permanent coalition government, electoral uncertainty and short-term political tenure has reinforced short-term political decision-making where budget spending follows electoral cycles (Cousins, 2007). Parties manage or minimise potential policy conflict among coalition partners by using programme managers to gain early consensus of all party leaders involved in the government (Murray and Teahon, 1997:258; O'Halpin, 1993:8). Cousins (1995a, 2005) and Hardiman (1998) highlight the power of the bourgeois or middle class in determining the development of a tiered welfare state. McLaughlin (2002) notes the power of professional elites and Montague (2001), Lawless (2001), and O'Flynn (2001) note the veto power of the middle class exercised through the media.

The Irish social partnership process and individual Irish social partners have evolved as strong veto players (Hardiman, 2000; NESC, 2005). Likewise the civil service composition of social partners is male, white and middle class. The state also remains patriarchal. Women (and other groups experiencing inequality) are underrepresented in all aspects of decision-making (O'Connor and Murphy, 2008; O'Connor, 2008).

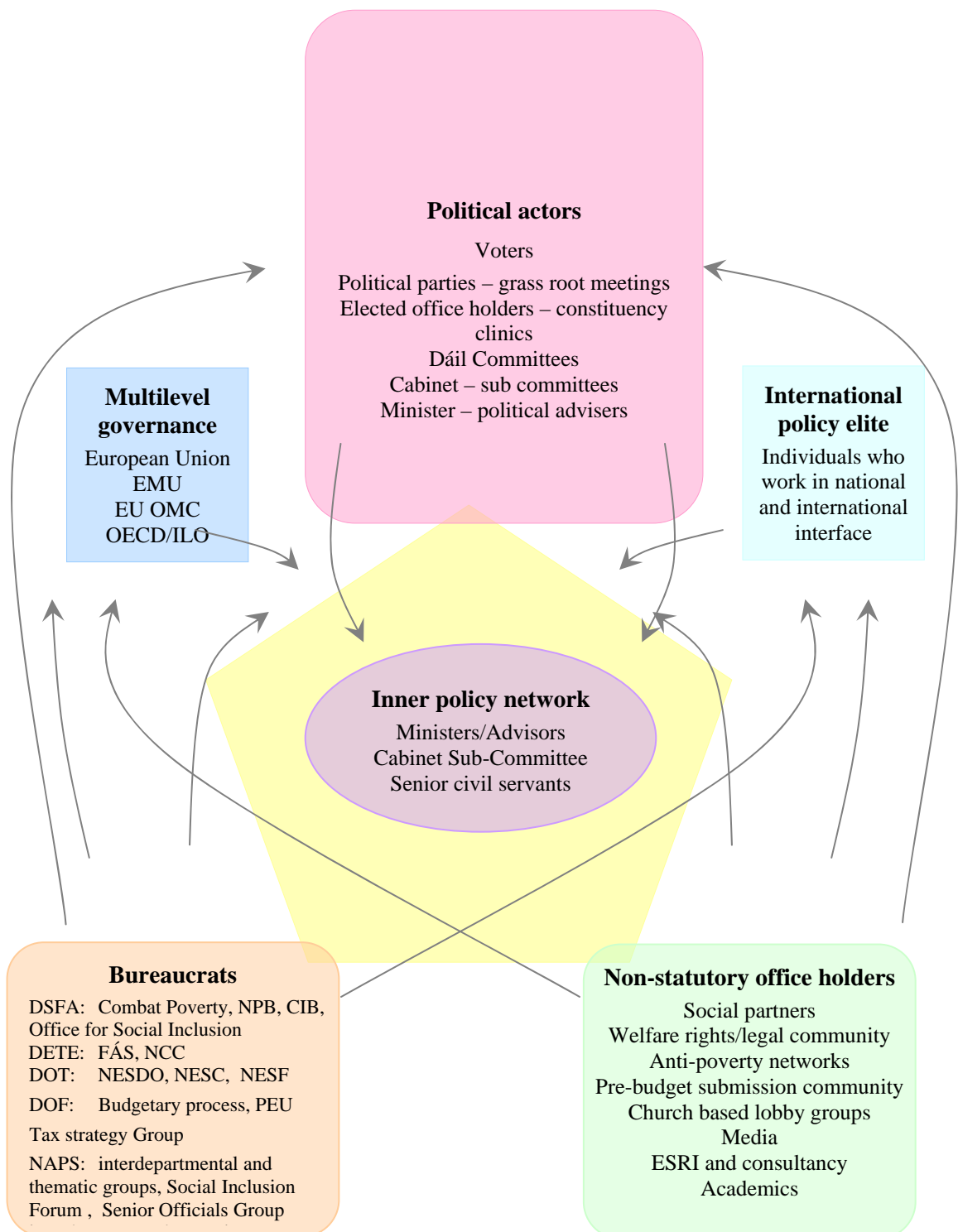
4 The policy community: domestic and international bureaucrats

Policy is understood as ‘an intended course of action or the rationale or decision to adopt, or not to adopt, an option from competing courses of action’ (Parsons, 1995:14). Public policy study is concerned with how issues and problems come to be defined and constructed and how they appear on the public agenda (ibid:xv). It does this by analysing interaction in the ‘policy community’ where actors and institutions with a common policy focus use a shared language to discuss and bargain about policy ideas (Sabitier, 1999).

Policy science literature warns against attempts to analyse too much order in chaotic policy processes where each process is unique and complex (Burton, 2001; Howlett and Ramesh, 1995). It is helpful nonetheless to disaggregate policy processes into three discrete independent variables: ‘interests’, ‘institutions’ and ‘ideas’. These variables determine the pace and direction of policy change in any policy community (Hay, 2004a:204). Hay (2004b:246) stresses how ‘policy-making, even in response to common external challenges, is a highly complex and differentiated process’. This process is made even more complex by the transformational influence of globalisation on governance.

Cerny (2002a) used the imagery of a policy community transforming from a traditional ‘iron triangle’ to a ‘golden pentagon’. The iron triangle is used to describe a domestic policy community with three traditional points of power (bureaucrats, politicians and non-statutory actors). The golden pentagon imagery suggests a transformation to a more complex and fragmented policy community with two additional points of power (multilevel governance and transnational policy elites). This imagery (depicted below) provides a way to map the Irish social security policy community, a pre-requisite to understanding how policy is mediated.

Figure 4.1: Irish social security community



The following cursory examination of the actors and interests within the social security policy community aims to develop an understanding of the dynamics and relationships in that policy community and whether these have changed over the past 20 years. This section analyses three points of the pentagon: bureaucrats, multilevel governance and the international policy elite. The following section analyses the remaining two points of the pentagon: the political community and other interests groups which are grouped under corporatist, pluralist and elitist headings.

Most institutions, whether state or societal, work at national level,¹⁰ and are organisationally independent, stable and well resourced. There is overlap, dialogue and interaction between the institutions and interests. The community is relatively fluid. Policy agendas move across institutional spaces¹¹ and membership of institutions changes over time.¹² Brewer and de Leon (1983) stressed the importance of decision-makers' subjective preferences. Senior membership of these spaces is primarily male, middle-aged, third-level educated, home-owning and white. Mainly indigenous Irish, they share common Christian-based social and political values. Continuity and stability enables informal networking. While internationally Irish policy institutions such as NESC and ESRI are well regarded, in interviews with actors in the community there is a common self-diagnosis of an underdeveloped policy capacity and a weak policy learning capacity.

Having discussed these general characteristics, discussion now turns to the five points of the golden pentagon. We first examine the bureaucrats and secondly the non-statutory actors (corporate social partnership, pluralist civil

¹⁰ Regional health board and social security structures and local office-level staff are not distinctly visible in the policy community. Community-based or work-based local level actors participate in policy debate through their own national organisations. Lack of direct local participation is seen as problematic and various institutions have initiated ways of opening up more sub-national input into the anti-poverty debate (NESF, 1997).

¹¹ The NAPS, for example, was initiated in the political system, driven by the civil service, supported by civil society, underpinned through Social Partnership and strengthened through interaction in the EU.

¹² Politicians are now members of the NESF, the CVP is now part of the NESC, and more groups attend the DSFA pre-budget forums.

society and power elites). We then move to examine whether there is evidence of either multilevel governance or an international policy elite before finally examining political actors and institutions. Given the constraint of space this is necessarily generalist and not inclusive of every aspect of this policy community. The period referred to covers 1986 to 2006 and only captures a broad sense of that time.

4.1 Civil service

The senior Irish civil service is characterised by its homogeneity. Catholic, middle-class, male, with a rural, educated background, civil servants are powerful and can and do veto policy agendas (Lukes, 2007). However, they now work in a more crowded and fragmented policy community and have to share space with social partnership. The typical Irish civil servant works in a conservative culture that has been slow to transform under the Strategic Management Initiative (NESC, 2003; Pollit, 2005). Policy change is dominated by slow, incremental, path-dependent administrative considerations (Crotty, 1998). This more complex and fragmented policy-making process makes it difficult to move without consensus and leads to procrastination and policy paralysis or inertia (NESC 2006).

The civil service is not a monolithic interest group. Departments compete with each other and the Department of Finance has effective veto power over other Departments. Policy capacity is often weak and, because government Departments have devolved policy functions to numerous statutory agencies, is increasingly fragmented (Clancy and Murphy, 2007; OECD, 2008). EMU convergence criteria have reinforced Department of Finance vetoes of public expenditure decisions, and access to Ministerial power is also more difficult in a more crowded policy community.

Laffan and O'Donnell (1998:161) argue that Ireland's lack of a national system of innovation was inimical to economic modernisation. NESC (2005, 2006) makes the same case for social innovation. While all Departments have in common a weak policy capacity, they can still be differentiated by cultural and ideological differences. The structure of the Department of Social

and Family Affairs (DSFA) is heavily influenced by the priority it affords delivery. Preoccupied by administrative and delivery challenges, it is limited in its capacity to engage in policy-making. This is not a simple resource issue, rather the pressures of guaranteeing delivery of weekly social welfare payments has influenced the Department's personality.¹³ Divided into operational and policy divisions (the brawn and the brains), the policy division (the Aireacht) is small and under-resourced but forward thinking, with bright and competent staff who have fostered good relationships within the policy community and engaged positively in social partnership.

Over the past two decades the DSFA has established statutory organisations.¹⁴ While these agencies institutionally strengthen the Department's policy capacity and all make contributions to policy debate, they also signal overlap and duplication and are an indicator of the complexity and fragmentation of the policy community. Most recently the Office for Social Inclusion was established to support engagement with the various National Anti-Poverty Strategy and National Social Inclusion Action Plans including the NAPSincl and other policy processes associated with the EU Open Method of Coordination.¹⁵

The Department's weak status in the hierarchy of Departments combined with weak policy capacity means it had little power to resist policy set outside the Department by international processes, other government Departments, political parties or social partnership processes.¹⁶ Within the Department there is tension between those who believe the Department should take a

¹³ This internal preoccupation with effective delivery of income supports was compounded by serious administrative failures in 1981 and 1989.

¹⁴ Citizens Information Board (previously Comhairle and National Social Services Board) which focuses on citizens' information and administrative and technical issues related to the delivery of welfare (Acheson et al, 2004); Combat Poverty Agency has a statutory function to advise the Minister on poverty-related policy, the National Pensions Board, the Family Support Agency

¹⁵ These are ongoing and post-date the period of this research (end 2006).

¹⁶ For example the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform's imposition of the 2004 Habitual Residence Rule

leading role in social security debate and those who focus on its administrative role delivering policy developed elsewhere.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) leaves much of its social policy function to its statutory body, the training and employment agency FÁS (previously AnCo). DETE statutory organisations (including FÁS, Enterprise Ireland and the Competitiveness Council) promote activation and welfare to work-related social security policy. Historically the DETE had an obstructive working relationship with The DSW. While the 'turf war' was more about institutional issues than policy, ideological differences are evident between the two Departments. The underpinning attitude of the DETE often portrays social security as an obstacle to employment.

Various attempts to co-ordinate policy across the two Departments include Programme Managers (1992), the Tax Strategy Group (1995), a Strategy Group on Long and Short-Term Unemployment (1997) and a more recent committee focused on welfare to work and activation issues. Since 1998 the Departments are required to work together under EU processes to deliver the National Employment Action Plan (NEAP) and also collaborate through the Senior Officials Group on Social Inclusion. The relationship is now more nuanced but still characterised by conflicting positions and significant gaps in coordination and data-sharing (Indecon, 2005). Institutional overlaps between the FÁS employment support services and the DSFA jobs support unit remain unresolved and are the subject of negotiation in the senior officials group.¹⁷

The more senior Department of Finance (DOF) is both ideologically and pragmatically associated with low public expenditure (Lee, 1989). O'Connell and Rottman (1992:231) argued that its legacy was to be 'opposed in principle to increases in state expenditure and taxes and in particular to increased commitments to social welfare'. This natural social conservatism of

¹⁷ In 2003 the Minister for Employment, Trade and Enterprise, Mary Harney, in an example of Irish pragmatism, offered FÁS to the Minister for the DSFA. The latter declined the offer because the Department believed that if institutional reform was to take place it needed to be a more considered and less pragmatic reform than that on offer.

the Irish elites (Adshead, 2008) and fear of escalating public expenditure was reinforced by the experience of the high rise in spending of the 1990s. Compared, for example, to the employment policy focus of the UK Treasury, the DOF has an underdeveloped policy agenda and is more interested in keeping spending down than in how public money is spent. The Public Expenditure Unit (PEU) which links the DSFA to the DOF is conservative about public spending. With a reputation for 'pouring cold water' over policy innovation, it vetoes spending in various ways, controlling the drafting of papers, refusing to adopt consensus reports and pressurising DSFA Ministers to cut current expenditure. The key policy priorities of Economic and Monetary Union, generating economic growth and avoiding borrowing, dominated the 1990s and to some degree expenditure implications rather than ideological positions drove decision-making. However, the DOF has a clear pro-market ideological policy agenda. It vigorously resisted the NAPS and Active Labour Market Programmes and contested proposals for refundable tax credits or using the revenue system to administer social protection.

The Department of the Taoiseach has no specific policy responsibilities in the area of social security but co-ordinates government departments involved in social partnership and NAPS institutions. The General Secretary to the Government, the most powerful civil servant in the country, heads this Department and attends all Cabinet meetings, chairs the NAPS Inter-Departmental Committee, the NESC and the NESF and national wage agreements and plays a key role linking political, civil service and social partnership actors. To break the dominance of Finance, various governments tried to develop a counterpoint institutional power in the Department of the Taoiseach (and during the period 1992–1994 a Department of the Tánaiste)¹⁸. Other methodological tools such as poverty proofing and gender mainstreaming were developed as potential counterbalances. However, no innovation has so far managed to break the monopoly role of Finance.

¹⁸ In the mid-1990s the Department of the Tánaiste played a co-ordinating role and developed the NESF which provides input into social security policy development.

Other Departments or government agencies institutionally relate to the social security policy community. The Health Service Executive administers the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme and local authorities administer the Rental Assistance Scheme. The Department of Education and Science has a common interest in the use of social security payments to fund adult participation in second chance and third-level education. Farm Assist income maintenance payment overlaps with Department of Agriculture incomes policy agenda.

4.2 Multi-level governance

When examining the emerging international policy community it is interesting to note an emerging site for policy in the new north/south bodies and the Ministerial Council as well as the British Irish council. To date implementation and administrative issues like staff development, fraud control, migration and information technology have been progressed in a cross-border policy context. It is likely that as these institutions evolve more cross-border policy development will happen.

Ireland's colonial history is evident in Ireland's participation in a social security policy exchange network of English-speaking countries including the UK, US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Policy shopping or policy transfer opportunities also arise through membership of international institutions including the United Nations related social security institutions International Labour Organisation and International Social Security Association. As discussed in Section Six, Ireland's membership of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) also influences Irish policy discourse. By far the most important international policy influence however is the European Union (EU).

Laffan and O'Donnell (1998:157) argue that membership of the EU is different to that of other international organisations 'as it alters the external

environment of the traditional nation state and its internal dynamic of policy making'. Ireland has adapted to the administrative and political demands of multi-levelled governance in the European Union. The EU policy system is complex and characterised by multi-level governance where national and supra-national institutions and politicians, bureaucrats and civil society actors engage in a multitude of co-operative working arrangements. Cram (1997) understands the EU as a bureaucracy where policy entrepreneurs seek to promote its potential role and independent agenda and expand its competencies by engaging in agenda setting and policy formulation, but not implementation. It invests in policy learning processes including networks, exchanges, conferences and research (Brine, 2000).

There is no commitment to EU-level social security convergence (Hay, 2004b). The EU principle of subsidiarity means that social security policy is developed at domestic level and EU member states are protective of their domestic social security systems (Ó Cinnéide, 2005). EU social security policy is driven by a free labour market ethos, which promotes the free movement of socially insured workers and those seeking employment. There is also an 'anti-social-dumping' agenda, which, in the context of competition-driven global trends, seeks to avoid a 'race to the bottom' by putting in place minimum income guarantees.

There were only two legal directives in the last two decades – the 1992 EU Directive on Minimum Income Guarantee (which did not fundamentally change Irish social security practice) and the Part-Time Work Directive (which required only moderate changes in social security provision for part-time workers). The political and policy influence is harder to measure but it is likely the EU was a very strong positive influence that moved Ireland from a traditional, Catholic, anti-poverty ethos to a social policy which promoted social inclusion if not equality.

While social security is not a strategic policy area for EU relations the Irish policy community does interact with relevant EU institutions. These include

the Directorate General V (DGV), the Social Dialogue, the Social Policy Forum, the Structural Funds and Social Inclusion budgets, the Social Protection Committee, the Employment Committee and the Open Method of Co-ordination of monetary, pensions, employment and social inclusion policy. Each Commission Directorate (DG) has its own policy-making style, strategy and institutional features that influence policy-making patterns. DGV 5, the social policy and employment directorate, is characterised by a heterogeneous collection of mainly politically weak organisations arranged around social and civil dialogue (Ó Cinnéide, 1993, 2005; Frazer, 2002).

The Lisbon Agenda promotes a three-legged strategy of competitiveness, job growth and social inclusion. It prompted a new policy process or governance process known as the 'Open Method of Coordination' (OMC) (Ó Cinnéide, 2005; Frazer, 2002; O'Donnell and Thomas, 1998) where national states enter into a process of co-ordination agreed at Council level, of strategic action plans with long-term common objectives and short-term actions. These are monitored by way of common indicators, joint EU evaluation, public accountability and the exchange of good practice (Frazer, 2002). More a co-ordination of process than a co-ordination of policy, OMC is an increasingly dominant policy style across five policy areas including social inclusion, pensions and employment-related social security issues. De la Porte and Pochet (2004) view OMC as a politically significant governance mechanism that allows the EU to act as a semi-sovereign policy system. Ferrara et al (2000) highlight the post-regulatory approach to governance that stressed the importance of hegemony (dominant discourses) for securing international co-operation. In all OMC processes this hegemony privileges fiscal discipline over social needs or social cohesion and employment is the cornerstone of social inclusion policy. A new language and technical discourse of policy-making includes concepts such as targets, indicators and mobilisation of all actors.

In the absence of OMC processes having statutory powers, there is only emerging evidence to confirm Cerny's expectation of increased multi-level governance. The OMC potential to impact depends on the capacity of the

domestic policy community to use the OMC indicators as political tools to lobby for improved domestic performance (Laffan and O'Donnell, 1998:170). The Irish state is selectively filtering its engagement with international social security discourse. Irish policy-makers are in control: 'I think maybe we are inclined to invoke Europe... when actually the lines of policy are what we would do anyway' (Smith, 2005:183).

4.3 Policy elite

The policy community has an inner policy network or a policy elite. A combination of power and knowledge-resources determines membership (primarily Ministers and Ministerial political and personal advisers and key civil servants). The membership of the mid 1990's Tax Strategy Group (TSG)¹⁹ mirrors this inner network. TSG is an inter-departmental committee chaired by the DOF and comprised of senior officials and advisers from the DOF, the DOT, the DETE, the DSFA and the Revenue Commissioners. It played a particularly important policy role in the 1992–1997 period, and, while of lesser strategic importance in recent years, still remains powerful. No social partners or non-elected office holders are included in the inner policy network.²⁰ The Senior Officials Group on Social Inclusion who report to the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Social Inclusion may also be regarded as a national policy elite. These policy elites still find it very difficult to achieve cross-departmental co-ordination.

Hall and Taylor (1996), Deacon (2003) and Cerny et al (2005) define an emerging alternative network based not on power or knowledge resources but on expertise and skills. Policy mediators or entrepreneurs are found in small informal networks of powerful individual actors. These networks are exist in the overlap of domestic/international institutions. The emerging

¹⁹ The TSG examines and develops proposals for taxation, PRSI and levies for the Budget and Finance Bills. The group examines the strategic approach for a general social welfare package and assesses the interaction of proposals on income tax, PRSI and levies with other social welfare proposals, including child income support, and in particular the impact of this interaction on the labour market and income distribution.

²⁰ However, TSG minutes record references to campaigning positions of ICTU, IBEC and the Community Pillar as well as the ESRI.

transnational policy elite comprises experts working in social partnership institutions (but not necessarily the social partners) and the ESRI and its technical experts who play a briefing/information role for the whole policy community. It also includes technical experts associated with the European Open Method of Coordination group of policy experts and some Irish policy actors who play lead roles in EU and other international organisations (Laffan and O'Donnell, 1998) and who bring international experience and discourse back to the Irish social policy community.

These policy entrepreneurs can form a distinctive policy network without formal power but with extensive knowledge resources and they have the capacity to bring new thinking into the policy community. Their subjective preferences, professional backgrounds, institutional affiliation and cognitive make-up will influence how and which ideas pass through institutions and this will impact on options for change.

5 The policy community: power and politics

This section examines the contribution more formal political power has to make to social security policy. It also examines corporatist, pluralist or elitist forms of power in the Irish social security policy community. We can expect that strong political leadership or champions could drive policy change but we have already suggested in Section Three that the peculiarity of Irish political institutions has a strong impact on the style of Irish policy-making.

5.1 Irish political parties

The historical origin of Irish political parties lies in a post-independence civil war intra-nationalist split, which dominated Irish politics and militated against a left–right ideological divide or a strong social democratic tradition in Irish politics (Mair, 1992:389). We noted earlier how Ireland’s distinctive post-colonial political institutions and populist culture can be distinguished from other countries with liberal welfare regimes. PRSTV dominates the Irish state; it can structurally account for multi-partyism and coalition governments and is culturally connected to consensus, corporatism and incremental unambitious policy-making. It is not surprising, given the moderate nature of the main parties (Smith, 2005:186), that a difference in policy emphasis is not the point of departure between political parties. What seems to differentiate parties is the level of ambition for a planned approach to social security reform and levels of appreciation about how social security policy relates to national development.

Who is in government matters. The Dáil and Dáil Committees have an underdeveloped role in policy-making and committee work is often dominated by delivery issues (a by-product of a clientalistic political culture). While in coalition governments the early negotiation of programmes for government can mean that smaller parties have considerable power to negotiate the policy focus, this also has to be balanced against the sheer power and dominance of Fianna Fáil who held ministerial office for eighteen of the twenty years examined.

Fianna Fáil, being the most populist, is more cautious than other parties about negative changes, more likely to engage in short-term electoral budget cycles and less likely to have a planned approach to policy (Cousins, 2005). The party's populist approach to policy development is a strong causal factor for the underdevelopment of various aspects of Irish social security policy. However, within Fianna Fáil there is significant diversity in Ministerial style and competence. The personality of various Ministers can be associated with various policy decisions,²¹ and Ministers are wary of the complex social security system and depend on the expertise of the civil service. A legacy of this close working relationship is the degree to which populist Fianna Fáil approaches to decision-making permeated the thinking and practices of civil servants. In 1992 Labour, in order to break this close relationship, initiated the use of 'political advisers' and 'programme managers'.²² The role has since varied widely and they are not perceived to have had significant influence.

The area under examination can be divided into three political periods: 1987–1992, 1992–1997 and 1997–2002. The stop–start nature of Irish activation strategies (programmes are often based on pilots and experience periodic retrenchment) can be explained by inconsistent policy across these stages. This suggests variations in political commitment to a fully developed welfare-to-work strategy and different degrees of emphasis on the degree to which policy should be offensive and supportive or defensive and punitive. From 1987–1992 centre or centre-right governments held power. In this period of fiscal rectitude the Fianna Fáil government had little social security ambition but understood the political expediency of protecting the incomes of the poorest. It readily accepted the consensus and expert analysis of the Labour Party initiated Commission on Social Welfare (Ireland, 1986) and gained the

²¹ The capacity of the Minister to argue his/her case against more senior ministries appears to be crucial. Minister Woods, for example, was able to set and win policy agendas while Minister Coughlan appeared to have had little success in defending social security interests. Urban Ministers are more sensitive to the electoral impact of social security reform.

²² The advisers liaise with senior civil servants and act as a link between the Cabinet, the Oireachtas Sub-Committees and the Civil Service.

consensus of the social partners in the Programme for National Recovery (1997) to maintain the real value of social security.

In the second period, 1992–1997, a centre-left coalition²³ government engaged with social democratic EU and UN dialogue in a reforming period marked by more ambitious policy processes including the Tax Strategy Group, the Expert Working Group on Integration of Tax and Social Welfare and a National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). Labour's influence in government increased the pace and volume of policy debate about reform, but resources for reform were limited. From 1994 to 1997 a non-Fianna Fáil Minister from a small left-wing Democratic Left Party, Minister de Rossa, held the social security welfare ministry. He appeared more willing to expose his party to electoral risk and was more ideologically orientated towards gender reform and a more rigorous but offensive activation model. Actively engaging with the international policy community, the socialist Minister looked to the EU social model and launched NAPS under the auspices of the UN Summit on Social Development in 1995.

From 1997 to 2005 a centre-right government engaged with a more neo-liberal, OECD-inspired rhetoric. The availability of resources and institutional capacity was not matched with political ambition for social security reform. The period was a missed opportunity characterised by active resistance by the DOF to developing anti-poverty and income adequacy strategies under NAPS (Johnston, 2002; Hanan, 2002). The second half of this period was marked by fewer resources and, since 2002, a period of robust retrenchment under a more pronounced neo-liberal PD–FF coalition. There is evidence of again a smaller party (Progressive Democrats) leading social security policy discourse in relation to non-nationals, conditionality and lone parents. This is again consistent with smaller parties advocating more radical policy agendas. However, towards the end of this period there was a distinctive softening of rhetoric by Fianna Fáil. This change of attitude to social security, reflected in

²³ A Rainbow Coalition of Labour, Fine Gael and Democratic Left followed a Labour–Fianna Fáil coalition.

higher rate increases in subsequent budgets, was attributed to electoral losses in the 2004 local elections.

Politics and who is in government matters. Fianna Fáil has clearly dominated the last two decades and its populist approach to policy development is a strong causal factor for the underdevelopment of various aspects of Irish social security policy. It is also clear that the personal characteristics of the individual power holders matter.

5.2 Non-statutory actors

Murphy (2002) identifies three coexisting principal patterns of organised interests: pluralism, corporatism and elitism. This section reflects on such interests and examines whether corporatist, pluralist or elitist forms of power have explanatory potential to account for the style of Irish social security reform.

5.2.1 Corporatism

Irish social partnership (NESF, 1997; McCarthy, 1998, 1999; Murray and Teahon, 1997, O Riain 2006) is a different animal to continental state corporatism. Corporatist structures were renewed in 1987, when government faced into a difficult period of retrenchment and re-established social partnership. Trade unions, employers and farmers worked in several overlapping institutional spaces to develop consensus on policy strategies and to negotiate and monitor national wage agreements. This enabled governments to 'adopt reforms with reduced electoral and social risks' (Natali and Rhodes, 1998:7). In 1994 Irish social partnership broadened to include the NESF and in 1996 part of the community and voluntary sector was incorporated into partnership structures (Acheson et al, 2004). Some credit social partnership as the cause of Ireland's more humane welfare trajectory, relative to the UK or the US (Kiely et al, 1999; Nolan et al, 2000; Kennelly and O'Shea, 1998; Daly and Yeates, 2003). Others argue that social partnership can, through co-option, limit protest and smother the potential for

more radical change (Allen, 2000; Broderick, 2002; Ó Cinnéide, 1999a; Murphy, 2002).

In other corporate institutions, both trade unions and employers may be directly involved in the administration of social security benefit. This is not the case in Ireland where social partners have little real expertise, interest in or ambition for social security (Hardiman, 1998; Cousins 2005). While there is evidence of PRSI changes on foot of business lobbying outside social partnership, both Peillion (2001) and Cousins (2005) argue that employers use their political capital in social partnership more to curtail the level of social expenditure, to influence the development of services useful to them and to veto change.²⁴

Trade union input in the first two national development programmes was significant but by 1996 trade unions had begun to limit their input to issues directly impacting on members. Cousins (2005) explained the paucity of the trade union contribution as a result of public sector unions having no direct interest in a means-tested social security system basically serving the poor. The interests of employed union members primarily fuel ICTU's interest in social security policy (Hardiman, 1998). These focus on low paid/casual worker issues, equality issues around parenting and maternity, child income support as it relates to childcare and pensions. Individual trade unions have developed specific social security policy interests because members are involved in the administration of social security (IMPACT, SIPTU, CPSU, PSEU) or because members in low-aid or precarious employment have specific social security needs (Mandate, SIPTU). ICTU has a weak practical capacity to develop policy and its participation in social security related processes is under-resourced. Individual senior trade union officials are part of the policy elite, brokering ideas and transferring policy learning from abroad (Laffan and O'Donnell, 1998).

²⁴ ISME, a competing business lobby group, unusually in the Irish culture and from outside partnership, has engaged in active anti-welfare social security discourse (Allen, 1998).

Members of the agricultural and rural based lobby groups focus primarily on rural-specific issues (pensions for farmers, Farm Assist and the social security needs of farming women).

The Community and Voluntary Pillar (CVP) is a social partnership participation mechanism comprised of a large number of diverse organisations representing specific interest groups (Acheson et al, 2004:103). Only a small number of the individual organisations directly input into overall social security policy. Others interact on specific social security issues affecting their immediate membership. Effective CVP participation has required collapsing individual organisational interests into coherent pillar-level policy positions. This causes tactical tensions, internal power struggles and strained internal relations within the CVP. The sectors' 1994 co-option into national corporate structures is unique to Ireland. It can be reflected positively as the strength of interest groups in Ireland (Healy, 1998) or as a state strategy to silence ideological debate or alternative political discourse expected from a third sector (Broderick, 2002: Murphy, 2002). CVP policy relevance has ebbed and flowed. High unemployment in the mid-1990s necessitated the problem-solving presence of unemployed/anti-poverty groups in national policy processes. However, as high unemployment decreased such relevance diminished and the gaps between the CVP agenda and the business agenda widened (Larragy, 2006)

With less power and capacity than other pillars, CVP is more accurately described as a pluralist lobby group than a corporate power with resources to negotiate (Hardiman, 1998). The sector's most significant role was negotiating social welfare increases. However, an important breakthrough in adequacy came in budgets 2005–2007. This breakthrough is associated not so much with social partnership but with a Fianna Fáil 2004 local election defeat. Following a bruising 2004 local election Fianna Fáil, eager to establish social inclusion credentials, removed a neo-liberal Finance minister, publicly courted a social inclusion dialogue and committed to a series of social welfare rate increases. To argue that political dynamics rather than social partnership dynamics were more central to the enhanced adequacy

agenda is not to diminish the CVP role but to argue that its power to achieve change was more pluralist than corporatist. Hardiman (1998:141) argues that 'the input of organisations representing the most disadvantaged is likely to be treated as "residual category" confined to securing whatever is left over after established interests have their say'.

In practical terms, apart from commitments to social security rate increases, scant social security policy change has been directly negotiated in social partnership. Cousins (2005) concludes that 'with or without social partnership the Irish social security system would look more or less the same'. However, to rest with Cousins' conclusion would underestimate the power of social partnership to provide an ideational framework for broader Irish policy. The role of Irish social partnership is more about maintaining a consensus around a shared macro-understanding of an economic model than contributing in a detailed way to social security development. Over time social partnership institutions developed into the National Economic and Social Development Office, an influential, government-funded think-tank which overviews a wide range of policy debate.

Social partnership-populated institutions play a powerful ideational role in developing and maintaining a consensual framework around a specific socio-economic model that subordinates social policy goals to the needs of the economy and employers. This is further discussed in Section Five which examines ideational power, but some key stages of ideational discourse in social partnership are introduced here.

Breathnach (2005) identifies, in her work, three clear stages of social partnership over the 1987–2005 period. An early foundation phase focuses on breaking the vicious socio-economic cycle and building a shared alternative future analysis; economic management dominates this phase. An expansion phase is marked with an increased focus on social/equality and sharing of benefits and an agenda that is increasingly broad but fragmented. Finally, the transition phase refocuses on economics and a process of narrowing and controlling the agenda.

Likewise, Ó Riain (2008:165–186) clearly distinguishes three phases of social partnership. The first phase is associated with national social partnership institutions and is characterised by ‘macro economic stabilisation’. The focus is on attracting foreign direct investment with tax incentives, and welfare is characterised by cutbacks and stabilisation. The second phase Ó Riain calls ‘developmental network statism’, characterised by the extension of the partnership regime, a deepening of the innovation system and managing growth and inflation. The third stage is that of a disciplinary state and marketisation characterised by ‘a growth machine’ focused on lower taxes and increasing domestic consumption with a narrowing of the development strategy and institutions and a reassertion of central state control.

Clearly, even if the social partnership process has not directly altered social security provision it is perceived as a powerful place to influence policy, and those excluded from its institution processes are excluded from key policy formation processes. Its most significant influence however is ideational – it sets the boundaries for what is considered plausible policy discourse about policy change in Ireland.

5.2.2 Pluralism

Social security is distinguishable from the rest of the mixed welfare economy in that all social security income supports are state delivered and tax or PRSI funded. Apart from direct civil service staff interests (represented by CPSU, PSEU, IMPACT and SIPTU) there are no large institutional insiders within the social security policy community. The engagement of wider civil society or the Community and Voluntary sector with social security policy predates social partnership and most organisations continue to influence through pluralist relations.

The Community and Voluntary sector includes a wide array of organisations operating from different power bases. The most dominant and perhaps most

powerful institutional actor is the Community and Voluntary Pillar (discussed under corporatism above). The sector inputs through the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, local development structures, pre-budget forums and traditional forms of direct lobbying and campaigning. Some larger national organisations maintain a coherent institutional engagement with government Departments including regular contact and bilateral meetings with both Departmental officials and Ministers, direct lobbying of politicians, circulation of policy literature, lobby days and attending political clinics in local constituencies. The sector also participates in consultation processes under the auspices of the NAPS, customer service initiatives or one-off Departmental policy consultations. Most activity however is focused on DSFA-organised annual pre- and post-budget 'listening' forums where up to 40 groups submit social security budget submissions.

While some groups have influenced agenda-setting, delivery issues and income adequacy outcomes, much of this discourse has been 'voice without influence' (Lister, 2004). The growing consultative voice of the sector 'has not proved enough to change policy priorities' (Hardiman, 1998:142). Why is this? It was argued earlier that the Irish political system advantages groups able to organise and promote their interests (Coleman, 2006). To echo Hardiman (1998:122):

we may find that at least part of the explanation for the relative lack of progress in redressing these inequalities may be found in a closer analysis of the patterns of interest representation in the form of party policies and interest group formation.

The sector does not have the policy-influencing power of a well-organised vested interest, and the absence of a national social security umbrella group dedicated to cross-sectoral campaigning on specific social security issues is noticeable. The National Campaign for Welfare Reform, formed as a national campaign to support the publication of the CSW in 1986, had lost momentum by the end of that decade and there has been no national campaign body

since.²⁵ There is little sense that social security is a political issue – politicians rarely worry about losing votes because of welfare. There is a perception within the policy community of duplication of work, inefficient use of resources and, relative to scale, ineffective impact (WRC, 2001), fragmentation and at times lack of trust and territorial dispute (Acheson et al, 2004).²⁶

While there are distributional alliances including 'Share the Wealth' marches and anti-cuts campaigns, anti-poverty groups do not always demonstrate solidarity with other groups (Allen, 1998). Like the contingent nature of the social security system, each group's social security agenda tends to be one-dimensional. While agendas are at times brought together through the mechanisms of the Community and Voluntary Pillar and/or Community Platform, these joint agendas tend to be combined lists of demands collated for negotiation purposes rather than coherent national campaigns.

In the British context Whiteley and Winyard (1987) and Lister (1988) observed the ease with which governments consciously play groups off against each other and the importance of members of the British anti-poverty sector acting as a single, unified lobby. Irish advocacy coalitions were effective in the short-term goals they set themselves.²⁷ Given the sensitivity of proportional representation to well-organised sectoral interests, the challenge is increasing the capacity to organise into a more proactive, strong vested interest on a longer time scale (Coleman, 2006; Harvey 2008).

²⁵ Forty groups came together to successfully lobby against the retrenchment ('Dirty Dozen') in 1992 and again to campaign against the 'Savage Sixteen' in 2004. However, a conscious decision was made not to develop a national social security lobby group. Despite clear capacity to work together the preference is for ring-fenced activity in specific areas.

²⁶ Civil society social security policy input is channelled through an infrastructure of welfare rights and citizens information organisations and free legal aid centres. These focus on access to information and report back to the DSFA about policy anomalies and delivery standards. They tend not to directly lobby about wider distributional issues or engage in broader structural policy debates. Local groups representing people living in poverty do organise into national networks and federations.

²⁷ These include the 1996 National Campaign for Welfare Reform, the Community Platform, the Community and Voluntary Pillar or ad hoc campaigns against the 'Dirty Dozen' and 'Savage Sixteen' or the late 1990s Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative, the Older and Bolder Campaign and the Equality and Rights Alliance.

Acheson et al (2004:197) argue that the state plays a key role 'in structuring the civic space in which voluntary action occurs' and that 'interaction of state drivers with cultural and ideological forces' shape voluntary action and development. This institutional space is state-controlled and meaningful distributional debate is limited (Acheson et al, 2004; Montague, 2001).²⁸

Such a relationship has been described by Broderick (2002) as a 'smothering embrace'. The sector's capacity to be an effective driver of change has been curtailed both by state (or Fianna Fáil) strategies to control or limit the development of the sector (McCashin, 2004) and by the sector's own failure to act cohesively (Acheson et al, 2004).

Harvey (2008) observes how the Irish state, by way of funding, regulation and institutional reform, has proactively attempted to orientate the Community and Voluntary sector (and hence civil society) towards a particular development model. The shift illustrates how the Irish competition state has attempted to manage domestic political tensions and mitigate societal reaction as it subordinates social policy to the needs of the economy. Harvey (2008) describes a more recent 2002 shift to a more managerialist culture as having an 'asphyxiating' impact on civil society. Without power to set the agenda or influence ideational debate, the most significant power of the sector is its veto power.

The community and voluntary sector's most powerful role is as a veto player – the potential electoral power of, e.g. Women in the Home, pensioners and lone parent's groups can act as breaks on more regressive and progressive ambitious change agendas. However, the sector does not necessarily use this veto power strategically. McCashin (1992:5) accuses the sector of shying away from hard reform choices and argues that it is 'inconsistent to chastise policy-makers... welfare pressure groups have not grasped and accepted the overall strategy of the CSW.... there are nettles to be grasped'.

²⁸ Quinn (2005) highlighted that successful pre-budget submissions lobbied for one specific change, but many groups choose to present elaborate reports and use the pre-budget submission process as a broad media strategy (Montague, 2001).

5.2.3 *Elitism*

Competition state theorists expect the business elite to be increasingly influential. Hardiman (1998) notes how business elites enjoy the advantage of seeking to influence governments fully committed to a national model of development that promotes competitiveness over social policy and that prioritises business interests rather than redistribution. Raj and McMahon (2003) found that elites influenced Irish privatisation policy processes. Elitist theories of power are likely to be relevant in the pensions policy area where establishment of the Pensions Board signified a governance shift that resulted in a partial privatisation of pensions. Domestic private industry has also impacted on PRSI rate-setting, and interests representing foreign direct investors have more recently influenced PRSI policy. Employer lobbies have also influenced Irish labour market-led immigration policy. The most powerful influence of the business elite is unlikely to be visible in policy institutions but to happen through personal and social networking (Schmitt, 1998). Byrne (2005) and Hardiman (1998:140) argue that as long as governments rely heavily on corporate donations for their funding there will always be a systematic bias in political decisions.

The Catholic Church has long been regarded as an Irish elite, though it has less direct influence in social security policy than in health and education policy where it has had much more material and social capital. Catholic Church-based organisations operate from quite powerful but declining power bases (Schmitt, 1998:217). Pellion (2001:176) concludes that ‘the church possesses no stake in social security, about which it has little to say’. Hardiman (1998) concurs, arguing that it now tends to act as spokesperson for marginalised communities through social justice interest groups (CORI, SVP and Bishops Conferences as well as the justice desks of the Vincentians, the Jesuits and the Mercy orders). Catholic Church groups are not homogenous and there is ideological debate within and between Catholic groups. The dominant Church voice in the social security debate is CORI (formerly CMRS) which throughout the past two decades has focused on a

basic income and adequacy lobby. With quite significant lobbying power, CORI is credited as 'undoubtedly the most effective' and has impacted on social security adequacy policy through creative long-term campaigning strategies (Powell and Guerin, 1997:16; Acheson et al, 2004:87).

The Irish social security policy community is noticeably devoid of think-tanks and has only a small knowledge elite. The social security policy reading circle is small and dominated by the ESRI, the largest and most technically able think-tank or academic research body in the country. Up to 2003 the ESRI held a key data set for the 'Living in Ireland' survey and is to some extent a 'policy monopoly' in social security research, with significant influence on policy language, definitions and technical discourse. While commissioned work tends to be quantitative, under its own initiative the ESRI publishes annual budget policy commentaries focused on critical analysis of social security policy. These are taken seriously in policy debate and input directly to the senior Tax Strategy Group. Other consultancy firms tend to be contracted on projects with narrow technical terms of reference determined by civil servants or politicians. A small number of independent consultants are hired by civil society actors to develop alternative policy positions to reform specific contingencies of social welfare. None of these consultants contribute to public discourse in the media.

Lack of access to data has effectively hampered academic research in this area. Given that since 2003 the CSO hold the data set for the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), there will be increased academic participation in relevant policy research. This is already evidenced by new research groupings on specific research topics. However, there is as yet no academic research group devoted to social security and there remain few funding sources for social science research. This, combined with exclusive membership of many Irish social security institutional processes, contributes to a limited engagement in social security from Irish universities.^{29,30}

²⁹ Faculties engaging in social security tend to be sociology or social policy. There is limited input from law faculties, economics faculties and multidisciplinary faculties such as equality or policy studies.

Sampson (2004) highlights the huge transfer of power to the media elite in the UK. Irish popular media can influence decisions. Montague and Trench (2000:48) observe how 'once a piece of research has been aired in public it passes much more easily into the policy process'. There is little institutional social security expertise or serious analysis,³¹ rather the media is used to campaign and lobby as groups try to influence decision-making by influencing public opinion. The growing awareness of the need to influence ideational thinking is reflected in how lobby groups have developed media strategies, employ press officers or use private media consultancy companies to manage specific campaigns (ibid:48).

Concluding this section we can see various power holders with influence and/or veto power in the Irish social security policy community. Individual civil servants have been powerful in either progressing or blocking the passage of policy or in furthering the agendas of certain lobby groups. Corporatist, pluralist and elitist power models also have explanatory potential. The Irish political system advantages groups able to organise and promote their interests. Groups with material and other resources to both organise members and articulate their interests have been more influential. Conversely, the least organised and most disadvantaged are residual and are least likely to voice their concerns in a way that influences the policy process and policy outcomes. Key individual trade union and community and voluntary sector leaders have also had ideational influence. In a small policy community relations between those in power also matter and the community is dominated by middle-class males. The community remains relatively insular, strategically using European and international discourse to amplify domestic policy agendas.

³⁰ The Policy Institute in Trinity College Dublin (TCD) has published three social security policy reports (Quinn, 2000; Healy, 2003; Murphy, 2008).

³¹ Some national and local radio stations and local newspapers have initiated advice-orientated social security slots but no national current affairs medium has a social security focused programme and there is no specialist social security magazine or journal.

6 Patterns of discourse

Frazer (1992:3) argues ‘that public support for the social welfare system is cultivated by open debate and political leadership’. Cerny et al (2005) and Torping (1999) stress the political construction of ideas as important causal factors with explanatory power in relation to social security change. Ideas play a role in the social construction of Irish social security discourse.

Analysing the discursive practices helps us understand how knowledge and meaning is produced in this policy community.

Irish political culture is a strong user of rhetoric. Its model of development is legitimated by rhetoric about social inclusion. Rhetoric and construction of sensitive but ambiguous language plays an important role particularly in relation to conditionality, activation and gender (Murphy, 2003; Nolan, 2002).³² One civil servant described how policy-makers are sensitive to the use of language:

These things were sold softly by people who might have had harder agendas; we have ‘get the scrounger’ mentality wrapped up in the ‘helping hand’ culture of the Department.

Discourse reflects ‘a group of statements which provide a language for talking about, or representing, knowledge about a particular topic. It rules in certain ways of talking and rules out other alternatives’ (Hall, 1997:44). Cox’s (1998a) ideational theory attempts to explain change by examining the passage of ideas through institutions. Blyth (2002:33–44) distinguishes between three stages of ideational change: ideas are used first as ‘weapons’ to argue for change, then as ‘blueprints’ to map the direction of change before finally being used as ‘cognitive locks’ to lock-in particular policy prescriptions and avoid alternative policy proposals. This raises the question

³² A strategy employed by Minister Woods was to ‘talk hard’ publicly about the need for a ‘punitive’ Job Search programme while arguing simultaneously in Cabinet that the real value of unemployment payments needed to be maintained. The ambiguous rhetoric of ‘systematic engagement’ in the National Employment Action Plan convinced many to leave the live

of how Irish policy institutions process or block ideas and where and how Irish ideas might be in a 'cognitive lock' (Connolly, 2007). This section examines how ideas are communicated, whether there is evidence of epistemic communities or policy monopolies, and what kind of discourse is evident in the Irish social security policy community.

Ideology appears absent in the Irish state (Coakely, 2004:53). At first sight, a lack of left–right division between political parties and a consensus approach between classes in social partnership suggests a pragmatic, flexible state enabling innovative policy change to adapt to the global economy. However, this absence of debate does not mean an absence of ideology. The absence of debate may in fact be a result of consensus about ideology.

The Irish state has always had a dominant hegemony. In the early days of the state this reflected the conservative, Catholic and patriarchal ideology (Ferriter, 2004a 337) and was maintained by a strong Church–State relationship. More recently this has softened somewhat but has also been augmented with a strong neo-liberal hegemony. Current hegemony is 'cognitively locked' into a neo-liberal agenda processed through social partnership and other state institutions like the Industrial Development Authority and the National Competitiveness Council.

Certain institutions, in the absence of well-resourced alternative policy advocacy coalitions, enjoy a monopoly role in Irish discourse. The ESRI analysis, for example, underpins social partnership (NESF and NESC) and anti-poverty institutions (Combat Poverty and OSI). Kirby (2002) argues that ESRI analysis is based on theoretical assumptions of 'rational choice' and that consequently poverty and social inclusion discourse is epistemologically rooted in classical economics theory. Such technical literature, focused on statistical measurement, dominates policy discourse, limits public debate and acts as a barrier to entry into the policy community.

register. The NESC DWS can be read as an opportunity for empowerment or as a threat of more punitive sanctions for unemployed people.

As discussed earlier, a second type of policy monopoly happens through social partnership. This monopolises the process of debate, favouring consensus over conflict and maintaining a strong narrative of shared understanding where 'social partners leave ideological differences outside the door and problem solve in the context of a shared understanding' (McCarthy, 1998,1999; NESF, 1997; NESC, 2005; Connolly, 2007; Harvey, 2008; Geoghegan and Powell, 2007). The state, explicitly and implicitly, by controlling funding and filtering social partnership participation, is able to mitigate dissent from hegemonic 'shared understanding'. Organisations which have tried to raise critical debate comment on the difficulty encountered in so doing (WRC, 2001). Individuals who venture into public debate quickly find themselves silenced (Murphy, 2002).

High levels of inequality are tolerated in a state dominated by a form of Catholic social teaching which focused, in the early years of the state, on more absolutist forms of poverty reduction and charity (Acheson et al, 2004; McLaughlin, 2002). This leads to political acceptance of a 'solidarity without equality' (Ó Riain and O'Connell, 2000:39). The impact of a shift to more individual values associated with neo-liberalism is likely to have further eroded societal support for equality. The patriarchal nature of the state explains its marked ambivalence to women's employment and this is reinforced by unequal gender participation in decision-making matters.

The dominant macro-discourse revolves around competitiveness and employment growth (Connolly, 2007). The dominant social security discourse revolves around technical debates about how to measure the perceived, socially-constructed policy problem of the day, work incentives and replacement ratios, definitions and measurement of unemployment, definitions and measurement of poverty/inequality and, most recently, labour market impacts of migration (Viet Wilson, 1998). It is possible to identify alternative discourse about a rights, equality and social spending approach. A less dominant discourse promotes family values, parenting and responsibility.

The ideational influence of international policy actors (OECD and EU in employment policy, EU in social inclusion policy and World Bank in pensions policy) is evident in Irish discourse albeit not as powerfully as might be expected of a competition state. There is for example consistency and overlap between the NESC (2005, 2006) and European Commission activation discourse. Irish policy entrepreneurs have opened up new reform agendas, transferred policy and influenced the pace and type of development of policies relating to activation and conditionality in Ireland. However, this paper argues that domestic political institutions and populist political culture make Ireland more immune to 'radical' policy prescriptions than other liberal regimes. This explains the more limited approach to activation and conditionality in Irish social security policy. One observer interviewed by the author linked the lack of ambition to the Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system:

There is a much clearer policy direction in the UK; you have the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister saying work, work, work, work, work, work. It's bound to percolate down a lot more than where you have a less clear message. The main reason for the unclear Irish message is fear of electoral loss of votes: in Ireland this fear is far more intense because of Proportional Representation.

6.1 Co-ordinative and communicative discourse

Schmidt's (2000) concept of 'co-coordinative discourse' refers to situations where change is managed through a closed elite-level policy process confined to the type of problem solving or lesson drawing that leads to incremental reform. The alternative is 'communicative discourse', capable of promoting social learning and leading to a change in values and a more fundamental restructuring of policy. Schmidt (2000:306) concluded that countries manage adjustment to the external economy,

not only because of their greater or lesser economic viability, their greater or lesser institutional capacities and better or worse policy responses but also because of their more or less convincing legitimating discourse.

The most successful countries have coherent co-ordinative *and* communicative discourse. Cox (2001) gives the example where in both

Denmark and Netherlands change was achieved in part by social construction of an imperative for that change through communicative and co-ordinative discourse. He observes that failure to do this was a factor in the failure to reform welfare in Germany

Scarphf (2000b) argues that more substantive change requires that ideas be processed in a wide, communicative political discourse that enables social learning and attitudinal change. While Gillespie (2005) notes that 'glimmerings of debate are visible' from some trade union and voluntary sector organisations, a more common feature of the Irish social security policy community is the degree to which debate happens among a narrow sub-group of policy actors in a tightly controlled coordinative technical discourse.

Such discourse (often held within social partnership but also in closed expert groups and inter-Departmental committees) discourages ideological discussion by limiting policy change to 'problem solving' with existing policy, existing macro-analysis and existing resources. Groups find it difficult to progress issues that cannot be mediated through consensus-based change and controversy is often agenda managed into 'working groups'. Irish discourse can be communicative but such public discourse (as in the case of conditionality, gender and equality) is often 'defensive' in nature. Various attempts have been made to widen social discourse into a more communicative style discourse, e.g. once-off Green Paper consultation processes or annual Social Inclusion Forums facilitated by NESF. With varying degrees of success, these widen participation in debate but are relatively structured and state-controlled spaces or processes.

It is possible to identify how three stages of changes in government impact on Irish policy debate. The first stage, 1987–1992, was when a paradigmatic national political consensus was developed around a monetarist and increasingly neo-liberal focus on fiscal rectitude and competitiveness. This concept was used in *communicative* discourse to the nation at a time of social and economic crisis, with political leadership identifying a clear vision

of social partnership based on the NESC (1987) policy blueprint which became cognitively locked into a neo-liberal policy agenda based on the primacy of competitiveness and a low tax model of development. However, even in this context, a 1987 social democratic-leaning, consensus-based Commission on Social Welfare report enabled an alternative, more benign consensus to emerge about the social security policy prescription for national recovery. This decisive, ideational Irish social security regime pushed change in a qualitatively different direction than did the neo-liberal-leaning Fowler Report of the same period in the UK (Lister, 1988).

The second stage was when strong centre-left political leadership promoted equality and anti-poverty policy to try, within the constraints of the existing cognitive lock (Blyth, 2002; Connolly, 2007), to shape a policy agenda for a more equal society. The agenda identified the need for new institutional structures that sought to overcome the limitations of Irish political culture by enabling new actors to engage in wider communicative discourse in bodies such as the NESF and NAPS and campaign for innovative, offensive activation policies.

The third stage, dominated by a centre-right government, refers to the reversal back to a more neo-liberal coordinative discourse where a statistical and technical discourse reinforces the cognitive lock by prioritising global competitiveness. Not only is there little engagement with new institutional structures like NAPS but also attempts to dissolve alternative policy coalitions and prevent more communicative discourse are evident (Geoghegan and Powell, 2007; Harvey, 2008). Mainstream policy actors have resisted and actively vetoed policy agendas relating to poverty, relative income inequality, individualisation, childcare and the social needs of migrants.

Kennelly and O'Shea (1998) note the paucity of recent social security debate in Ireland, while Cousins (2005), NESC (2005) and O'Connor (2005) reflect on how the absence of crisis in the social security system dampens initiatives for reform. In general social security debate is limited by a hegemonic neo-liberal discourse and a political culture that tend towards short-term views

and small incremental reforms. Cousins (2005) notes the ideological dominance of the market and lack of realistic policy alternatives from right or left ideological sources.

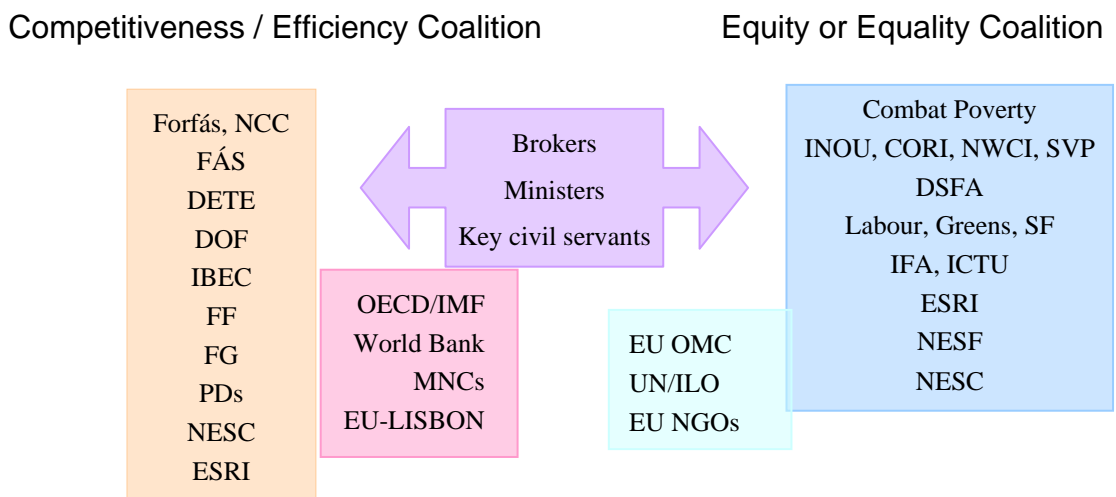
This section concludes that the particular Irish-style coordinative discourse is a key variable that maintains a narrow, problem-solving approach to policy-making at the expense of more value-led popular discourse that might create social attitudinal change. Controversy is avoided by careful and ambiguous use of rhetorical language. When elite policy-makers control policy development in a highly co-ordinated and technical discourse it is more difficult for political actors to engage in the social learning needed to legitimise such change.

6.2 Advocacy coalitions

How do discourses interact with different institutions and political actors? This section uses an advocacy coalition model to bring deeper understanding to the interaction of the three components of the policy system described in the previous sections – institutions, politics and discourse (Hay, 2004b). An advocacy coalition framework enables a deeper understanding of the relationship between institutions, actors and discourse. Advocacy coalitions are sub-sets of groups defined by similar knowledge and interests working together within a policy community. Different advocacy coalitions are identified with different policy discourses (Sabatier, 1999; Boyle, 2005:19). Members of each coalition interact informally to reinforce particular policy arguments and to argue for particular policy changes. They draw on sympathetic analysis in international organisations and may sometimes work together formally on joint politically-oriented campaigns. Policy brokers mediate between competing coalitions of policy actors. Policy decisions can be understood as the outcomes of power struggles between these competing coalitions.

In Ireland it is possible to identify a strong, neo-liberal, competitiveness policy advocacy coalition and a weak, social inclusion and redistributive advocacy coalition, each with a distinctive policy discourse. For illustrative purposes the dominant institutions and actors who debated income adequacy policy within a 2001 social partnership Benchmarking and Indexation Working Group are outlined below. These coalitions co-exist in a common Irish political culture, which stresses consensus and pragmatism; hence no advocacy coalition is likely to be extreme.

Figure 6.1: Advocacy coalition








7 Conclusion and Recommendations

The advocacy coalition approach outlined in the previous section usefully offers a cross-sectional view of the relationships between different actors in the policy community. However, it tells us little about which coalition has power and why or how power shifts between different coalitions. John (1998:168) advises charting the relationship between the institutions, ideas and interests and analysing this dynamic at different points of domestic and international economic and political cycles.

Sections three, four and five already identified different social partnership, political and ideational cycles. These have in common a rough temporal cycle which can be demarcated by the years 1987–1992, 1992–1997 and 1997–2005. Figure 7.1, Policy Coalitions and Policy Cycles (below), identifies key factors that combine to influence the dominant policy discourse in each cycle. This illustrates how both internal and external ideational debate, interests and institutions all were formative factors in determining social security choices. The relationship between the variables is circular and reinforcing. Political power appears a key factor differentiating the periods in question. The relationship between the political parties in terms of ideas sourced within the international political economy and different levels of commitment to institutionally promote communicative debate also seem to be key factors in determining the climate and appetite for change.

Figure 7.1: Policy coalitions and policy cycles

The following coloured circles are used to symbolise different influences:

- 1  Policy ideas (type of policy ideas and source of policy ideas)
- 2  Institutional influence (the role of social partnership and of the civil service)
- 3  Political influence (who is in political power/type of political discourse)
- 4  International policy influence (key international debates)
- 5  International economic influence (crisis, growth, competition)

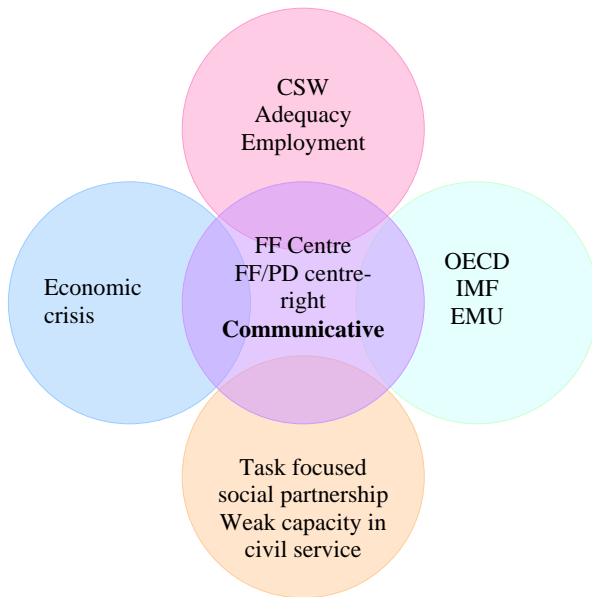


Figure 7.1a

1987–1992, Growth Coalition

A right of centre political dynamic in an economic crisis with both communicative and co-ordinative discourse in a relatively weak policy system. International community dominated by EMU, IMF and OECD.

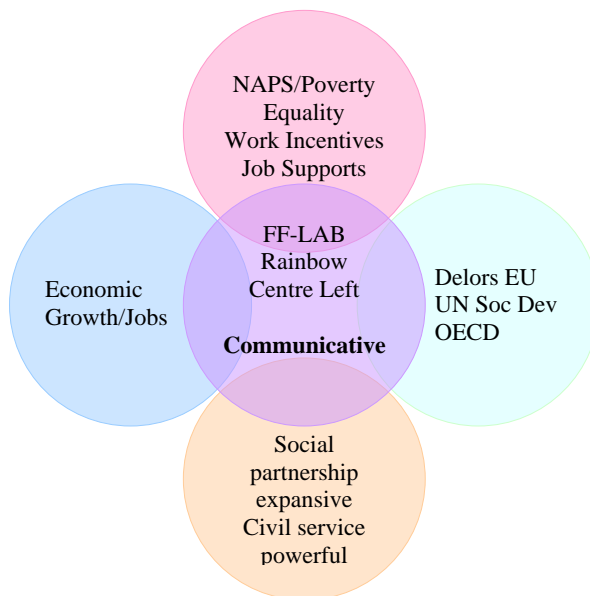


Figure 7.1b

1992–1997 Equity Coalition

A left of centre political dynamic in cycle of economic growth, attempts to create more communicative discourse and to enable the policy system. International community dominated by UN and Delors White Paper and OECD Jobs Crisis

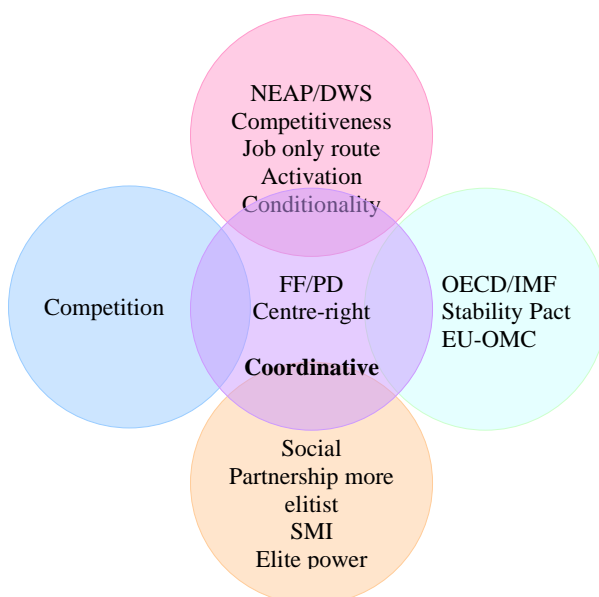


Figure 7.1.c

1997–2006 Competition Coalition

A right of centre political dynamic in a cycle of growth in a more competitive international political economy. Less communicative discourse, policy debate more elitist and closed. International discourse dominated by Lisbon Economic agenda, NEAP and OECD.

7.1 Conclusion

This paper has explored how Irish institutional and cultural features domestically constrain global economic and political pressures on social security policy. The peculiar features of Irish political institutions can at least partially explain why Irish experience has differed from other liberal regimes. This focus on domestic constraints to globalisation highlights how responses to challenges posed by globalisation have to be found in domestic institutions and governance (McCarthy, 2006). This is the case whether the response is reactively responding to fiscal pressures associated with globalisation or is proactively attempting to strengthen social security in anticipation of new risks and challenges. In either case there are strong domestic constraints on policy change and while this may impede negative reforms it also impedes positive reforms.

This paper concludes with a series of recommendations to strengthen the Irish social security policy community and its policy capacity to respond positively to modern challenges. The concluding discussion is organised into five key themes: the political system, civil society interest group formation, communicative discourse, policy capacity, and the international policy community. Key recommendations are boxed.

7.2 Political system

Veto theorists anticipate that the more veto points the less capacity for radical change and the more muted the impact of globalisation. Ireland offers an interesting case study of a country with a liberal regime but without the type of majoritarian electoral system found in other liberal systems (Swank, 2002). Irish impulses towards more liberal responses to globalisation are held in check by more inclusive Irish electoral and corporate institutions. The conventionally hypothesised globalisation dynamics (Swank, 2002:279) are not absent in Ireland but they are certainly muted. Irish institutions influence most by limiting potential policy choices. The Irish policy community is in 'low level equilibrium', experiencing a relatively 'frozen landscape' of social

security reform (Esping-Andersen, 2003).³³ This is not unusual (Burton, 2001:213), but Irish institutional vetoes, in particular the proportional representational electoral system, have a particularly strong limiting impact and directly contribute to policy inertia.

While recommendations about the Irish electoral system are not in the scope of this short paper, attention is drawn to recommendations for reform of the Irish electoral system. (Laver, 1998; Barry, 2005).

There is also a clear democratic deficit in the degree to which the life experience and priorities of end-users are reflected in the policy-making system. A wide range of policy tools and processes have been developed to enhance the likelihood of equality and anti-poverty outcomes. These include poverty proofing, equality proofing, budget impact assessment and gender mainstreaming, but they are not being used to good effect (Callan, 2004; Hanan, 2002, McGauran, 2005). Danish policy-makers have a statutory obligation to ensure that the process of policy development and implementation includes consultation with end-users of policy (Van Aerschot 2003). There are clear democratic deficits in relation to representation of women and other groups experiencing inequality in the social security policy community. Existing government policy regarding 40:60 gender quotas is simply ignored (O'Connor, 2008) and need to be made a statutory obligation.

An active social policy envisaged in the Developmental Welfare State should statutorily require that

- a) policy tools are used as appropriate during key stages of the policy cycle
- b) there is appropriate consultation with end-users of policy
- c) participation quotas are set for groups underrepresented in policy process.

7.3 Civil society interest group formation

³³ Like the Irish weather (not too hot, not too cold and rain all the year round) the Irish social security policy community has a temperate personality (not too left, not too right and incrementalism all the year round).

Institutional and political struggle in relation to policy matters hugely. An important and ongoing site of struggle is the emerging tension over the role of civil society and the community and voluntary sector.³⁴ Hardiman's (1998) assessment that civil society organisations representing the poor are weak is worrying but is consistent with many such organisations perception of themselves. The transformative capacity of the sector to respond to the increased pressures and vulnerabilities of globalisation is limited (Acheson et al, 2004). The sector's work is most influential when it works through larger advocacy coalitions. The opposite is also true: when the sector lobbies for conflicting approaches governments manipulate the 'palpable' differences between organisations as an excuse for doing nothing (Cousins, 1995a:114). Joint policy development work across organisations would maximise the sector's power as a vested interest capable of influencing electoral outcomes (Coleman, 2006).

A structured national campaign for welfare reform could be built through a permanent coalition of the up to 40 groups who have a recognised interest in social security reform. This could divert from a strategy of ineffective, short-term pre-budget submissions towards more individual, personal engagement between lobbyists and civil servants (Acheson et al, 2004:101).

7.4 Communicative discourse

The paper concludes that the style of policy discourse of Irish institutions mitigates against negative reform but also fails to legitimate an agenda for positive reform. Irish political culture promotes a non-ideological approach to political debate where political decisions about redistribution are reduced to technical statistical debates. A value-led debate in a more communicative discourse is needed to change priorities at a political level and identify alternative policy agendas. Larragy (2006) argues that redistributive political

³⁴ This space is vital as it is from here that Polanyi's (2001) 'double movement' or societal reaction to commodification is likely to emerge. Polanyi (2001) anticipated that, following a 'movement' towards commodification, society, sensing a diminution of human welfare, will respond in a 'double movement' by pressing the state to protect society from the excesses of market greed. Polanyi clearly differentiates civil society from the state.

decisions are better kept for the publicly accountable, representative political system. Politics can be assisted but not resolved through policy consultation (Davis, 1997). Ultimately more communicative and inclusive discourse needs to be led, not by a compromised state, but by civil society in a political dialogue with the state. This requires civil society to focus more of its energy on creating communicative discourse. Such discourse is unlikely to be heard from within the 'smothering embrace' (Broderick, 2002) of a cognitively-locked social partnership. Where social partnership is considered to have a consultative role in policy-making, the appropriate forum should include a wide a set of people directly impacted by the policy, including service-users, people living in poverty, women and migrants. Other wider forms of civic debate such as those originally envisaged in NAPS should be promoted.

Civil society groups need to avoid inappropriate use of the social partnership processes to develop social security policy that is more appropriately developed through public political dialogue.

7.5 Policy capacity

Reference was made earlier to the perceived weak policy-making capacity of Irish institutions in general and of social security institutions in particular. While there may be a tendency for the policy community to underrate itself, it is also the case that relative to other countries Irish social security is under-researched. The DSFA 'Aireacht' with responsibility for policy-making is currently under-resourced and pressurised.³⁵ It may be useful to revisit the Commission on Social Welfare (Ireland, 1986) recommendations for a National Social Security Agency that would be charged with developing a strategic overview for social security policy. Forfás, which provides good-quality proactive analysis to the enterprise policy community, might be a useful model. Any such agency could make proactive use of the departments statutory agencies who have an underdeveloped and under-utilised policy

³⁵ Within the Department opinion is mixed as to whether or not the DSFA should lead social security policy debate and have a clear, resourced policy role. The delivery-focused Department appears to have limited aspiration for a more ambitious role in policy development. In the context of such ambivalence, additional policy resources may not be used to optimum advantage.

role, including the Office for Social Inclusion, the Combat Poverty Agency, Pensions Board, Comhairle (now Citizen's Information Board) and the Family Support Agency as well as the social security related functions of the Equality Authority and National Disability Authority.

A National Social Security Agency should be established with a remit to develop a strategic overview for social security policy.

The pro-enterprise culture of the DETE dominates the social policy function of that Department. There are doubts about the capacity of FÁS to gender-proof the delivery of training and active labour market programmes and this is a serious obstacle to the implementation of good activation (Murphy, 2008). It is not clear that it is useful to retain the institutional separation of DSFA income supports from FÁS employment services (Boyle, 2005).

More institutional co-operation is required between the DETE/FÁS and the DSFA. In the short term an information and systems protocol and data-sharing strategy is required to ensure that more effective co-operation and outcomes are achieved between the two agencies (Indecon, 2005). In the longer term a fuller institutional merge may be required (Finn 2001).

Non-statutory organisations also need to develop consistent social security expertise. Of particular importance given the stress in Ireland on corporate governance is the contribution both business and trade union lobbies can make to social security policy development. Globalisation and the national context of competitiveness sets the parameters for social security reform and directly impact on for example PRSI rate setting. McCoy (2008) makes a strong argument from a business perspective for aligning business with universal moral values and personal values. Cousins (2005) and Hardiman (1998) observed how Irish trade unions have less strategic interest in, and capacity to engage with, social security issues than their continental counterparts. Investment is needed by both ICTU and IBEC to develop the

potential governance role of business and capital in relation to social security and transparent institutional processes are required to structure this role.

A National Pay Related Social Insurance Board with social partnership representation would strengthen and make transparent the governance of the PRSI system and the respective governance roles of the social partners.

The small Irish social security academic community is networking more coherently through the Irish Social Policy Association. A social security sub-committee would be a useful development for this association. The DSFA could develop expertise by diverting some consultancy budget away from the major consultancy firms (including ESRI) and some work from social partnership institutions, moving instead towards using smaller university-based consultancies. One outcome of this might be more diverse voices and a greater capacity to tackle policy monopolies.

An interdisciplinary social security academic research grouping should be established under the Irish social sciences platform, and social security research should be a priority for funding under Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

7.6 International policy community

Despite domestic constraints, global and international economic and political developments clearly have a significant bearing on Irish social security policy. Ó Cinnéide (2005) distinguishes between the prescriptive obligations and the indirect persuasive influence of the EU. It is likely that over the coming years the Open Method of Coordination will bed down more into the domestic policy community and process of governance. In the longer term, the OMC process may lead to 'cognitive Europeanisation', where member states adopt EU policy-making tools for consultation and decision-making (Sotiropoulos, 2004:282) and this may influence future policy formation as much as direct regulation (Guillen and Alvarez, 2004:297). This presents potential opportunities for those wishing to promote a more balanced model of

development. Hettne (1995) highlights the role of political discourse in promoting hegemonic regimes. Deacon (2003) is optimistic, like Cox, that an alternative political economy discourse might emerge based on social solidarity, equity and universality. At a global and EU level networking and drawing from such international discourses will continue to play a role in framing domestic policy debate.

Those seeking greater equity should continue to develop transnational and multi-level advocacy coalitions to promote global and EU visions of more equitable developmental paradigms, models and policies.

7.7 Conclusion

Globalisation presents threats and opportunities to Irish social security policy. However, opportunities can only be realised by breaking the path-dependence of a conservative, cognitively-locked policy environment with a weak commitment to equality. The reforms outlined above have potential to change the electoral dynamic and improve weak policy making and implementation. Also needed is a shift in power. A new interest group formation strategy among civil society actors could generate more communicative discourse and enable greater use of a positive international ideational influence. All of this might strengthen the possibility of more equitable outcomes from future policy.

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